

ALCHEMY: A SYMPHONIC POEM,

Robert Hillyer





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A SYMPHONIC POEM

BY

ROBERT HILLYER

AUTHOR OF "FIVE BOOKS OF YOUTH," "SONNETS AND OTHER LYRICS"

WITH DECORATIONS BY
BEATRICE STEVENS



NEW YORK
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THE PLIMPTON PRESS NORWOOD MASS U.S.A

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THE PRELUDE

THE PRELUDE





POET a thousand years hence!
Singer of times more dead to me than the past.
Face calm with unquestioned innocence,
Eyes with unworldly vision overcast;
Singer and poet, remember me in the dust,
When children whistling down the hills of doom
Run stealthy-footed by my tomb;
When withered leaves lie heaped in scarlet rust,
Or whirl along the chilly gust;
When trees stand gaunt and stark,
And the fountain freezes in the vacant park.

[11]



I WOULD speak to you shyly as fits my case,
Since to you these inquisitive years have run
their race
And written their answers in your face.

WILL you hear me speak across the years
In the night's high choirs,
Under the hanging spheres
When the comets trail their fires
Through glassy zeniths where all thought and light
expires?
O be my friend, and I will be your brother,
And we shall sing strange songs to one another;
I will be gay with you and share your laughter
During your carnival; thereafter,
Hearing you weep, I too will shed my tears.

[12]



BEHOLD this early autumn morning; trees
Still green though petulantly whispering,
Their leaves rattling in the fitful breeze,
Their accent sadder and a little harsh,
Discord of scraping bow on broken string.
Faint mist in spiral filters from the marsh
And creeps along the hill. I too have known
This overtone
Of fall that quivers into sharp delight.
You feel it now, the chill upon the moors,
The pungent morning and the perilous night;
You smell the scattered smoke of smouldering leaves;
You hear the lost winds whining in the eaves,
Like ghosts of troubadours.



CUP-BEARING spring is gone, but her wine
remains
Spilled on the crimson plains,
And the hills reeling with colour beneath the sun,
Overflowing the walls of tombs and the dun
Disaster of forest rent by the woodman's axe;
The buffeting wind curtails her brusque attacks,
And the woodland sleeps, storm-surfeited; —
You will have other woods when mine are dead.

FOR the years in pageants go their rounds
To a monotonous singing,
Rising and ebbing sounds
From the April wind rain-bringing,
That slants across the night with songs of green herbs
springing,
To the loud, tramping blizzards of December,
Screaming "Forget!" to a world that would remember;

CYCLE on cycle wheeling by, and you alone,
Poised on the brink of the reticent unknown,
Seeking the pivot of the whirling change
That flings us on, disconsolate and strange.



THE FIRST CANTO





OUT of a dreary house I came
From long communion with the dead,
Down sombre windswept streets that led
Between grey walls eternally the same ;
My unaccompanied footsteps beat
A clangour down the empty street,
Until the city fell away from me,
And suddenly I stood alone
On shores uncharted and unknown
Where tall rocks break the wild teeth of the sea.
Then on the breathless midnight came
Rumours of approaching flame,
The chariots rumbled down the skies
Striking out flashes of tremendous light.
With flaming swords the veil of night
Flared, as those battling centuries
Swept through the firmament, and passed, and
ceased.



A NEW wind struggled from the east,
The sea fell back with intermittent moan;
One last flash quivered down the cloud,
And, in that moment, I beheld the Stone.
It lay half-hidden, trodden underfoot,
With dead leaves heaped upon it like a shroud,
Clasped intricately in the tangled root
Of a tree that another storm had overthrown.
Not I the first to find it, nor the last;
Many have found it in the storied past;
Many will come whose stories are not told.
Plato beheld it when the Age of Gold
Flowered beneath his touch;
Exalting it against the skies he saw
Faces that blinded him with awe,
And marvelling overmuch
He cast it down, and left its shining worth
Half-hidden in the untransmuted earth.

[18]



SWIFTLY, and like a deity, he strode
Unto the cities where all men abode
In caves whose walls were black with busy
shadows.

"O You whose lives among the shades are passed,
I saw beyond your caves the radiant meadows
Where dwell the Immortal Forms by whom are cast
These flat, distorted phantoms. Speed you forth
On wings beyond the mountains of the north,
Ride out upon the chariots of the storms;
Behold the vast, incalculable Forms
Whose smallest thought, reflected on your walls,
Gives token of supernal carnivals,
And in whose minds the being was conceived
Of which you are the vague, wan spectres. Go.
And they that see aright, shall live, and know."
Thus Plato spoke; few heard and none believed.



WHEN Epicurus came. He found the Stone,
And touched the world around him into gold,
And cast the Stone away, nor would unfold
The gilded vistas Plato gazed upon.
Beneath his eyes the dawn lay all serene;
The earth reclining like a Virgin Queen
Offered her happiness to Man, who fled
Her raptures, harried by a cynic dread.
"O You whose lives are passed bemoaning death,
Propitiating gods, with futile breath,
Wisdom is that which sets the spirit free
From fears of death or hopes of life to be;
In sorrow vested in tranquillity,
In joy discreet, that chance may not enslave
A mind to things which only fools should crave.
Immortal gods may dwell
In those fantastic fields of asphodel,
Beautiful, perfect, young, immaculate,
But what care they of men or human fate?

[20]



If life be but a wavering shade, what then,
If it be worthy in the eyes of men, —
A calm, deep draught of beauty? all the rest
Is but the midnight's momentary guest."

THUS Epicurus in the Garden spoke
As one who knew the secret of the Stone,
But through the summer evening there was
smoke

Out of tall temples blown
Across the world to where one walked alone.
Another garden slept beneath the night
Where Jesus walked, and there was not a star;
Only the silence, and afar
The city spread into a fan of light.
He found the Stone, and turned away again,
Trembling that beauty was so rife with pain,
Nor touched the sky to gold, nor touched the earth,
But gave them both to darkness where abide
Those that make war against our mortal mirth, —

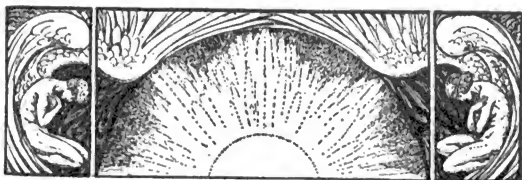
[21]



Slim, broken saints, sublimely crucified,
That hover on the fringe of eventide, —
And saying, "God is Love," left Godhead still
A menace on an unfamiliar hill.

O WRITE new Gospels in another tongue
Unknown to Mystic or to Pantheist,
How Love the Alchemist divinely came
Out of the nether blackness and the mist;
How in the empty firmament he hung
The constellations in a whorl of flame,
And hid the Stone of Beauty to transmute
The barren plains to gardens gold with fruit,
To change the filthy city into gold,
Dark streets to leaping rivers, pallid faces
To torches gleaming in the outland places,
So that through all these things, clear eyes behold
The blades of life escaping from the mould.

[22]



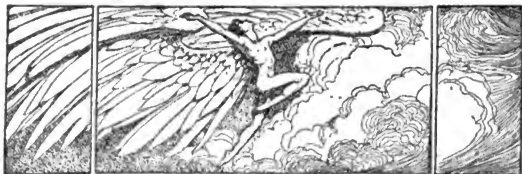
WHO sets his heart on unsubstantial god
Shall never enter into God's abode;
Whoever scorns the flesh, contemns the spirit
From whom the flesh derives her golden merit
Even as the moon, shepherdess of the tide,
Draws from the covered sun her veil of light,
And rides across the sky to meet the night,
And sinks into his arms, his occult bride.
To love is to adore the earth and bring
Forth children of her beauty, offering
To mortal love a mortal's counterpart,
And, unto Nature, love-children of art;
Seeking in finite things the precious grain
Of hidden beauty that shall yield its gain
Into the joyous hands of the master-player
Of life, but never to a hollow prayer.



MIDNIGHT looms upon her throne,
The sea retreats with wintry moan
Along the sedge-grown margins of the world;
Cities lie curled
Like gleaming serpents poisoning the shore.
Blank walls surround the soul once more;
Ahead there lies the long, unbroken street
Whose pounding pavements wound my feet;
Like monstrous blossoms here and there
Garish arc-lights splash the air,
And ever like a curious hymn
The throb of ponderous wheels, remote and dim,
Pervades the shriller voices of the night.
Before my sight
The brawling thieves and murderers pass,



And now and then some slender lass
Regards me with a twisted smile
And bids me rest with her awhile;
Blaring sounds from curtained halls
Where puppets whirl in bacchanals,
And under stately roofs make mirth
The great and wealthy of the earth,
The worse than thieves, the worse than whores,
Secure behind their carven doors.
A stunted elm tree in the park
Leans shrinking in the friendly dark;
Unnecessary shame to hide
Your honest, crippled boughs, where all
In this mad tinsel festival
Are stunted worse than you, for all their pride.



CAN such base metal be indeed
Transmuted into flawless gold?
Can any growth from such a seed
Come forth for clear eyes to behold?

O JOYOUS STONE whence music springs
Through the loud dissonance of daily things,
And struggles up with undefeated wings
To the high watch-towers where the Lover sings!

OUT of the ignoble ore
Cast aside upon the shore,
Out of this, as was decreed,
Flawless gold shall come indeed.



FROM the stars I saw the world
Like a blowing ember swirled
Through the aisles and vaults of space,
One of countless motes of dust
Fanned by every changing gust
Floating in a soundless place;
Out of that one grain shall be
Dedicate to deity;
From that grain the deathless Tree
And the lark of dawn that sings
Wisdom, Life, Divinity,
Singing now, as she began,
The beauty of incarnate man,
Love of flesh, of sky, of sea,
Love of life in mortal things,
Love.

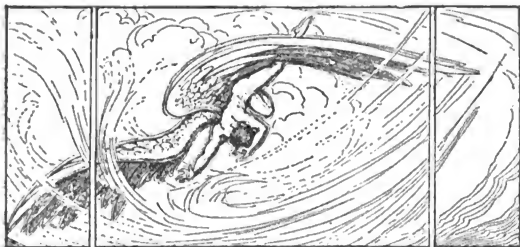




IN solemn march the stars' white torches pass
Across the void's illimitable glass;
In solemn march the thunder chariots form
Their blazing ranks across the midnight storm;
In the beginning was the word of Gold,
Flung out in wheeling accent, rolled
From deep to deep, from sphere to empty sphere,
Blown into cadences of age and year,
Spun into echoes over envious silence,
Sung into worlds against oblivion;
Being against Non-being; Love and Hate;
Light against Dark; the Word against grim Silence;
Reverberant from sun to sun,
And through the dim night desolate
Dancing in flames across the trembling spheres,
Comets the heralds, planets the pioneers.



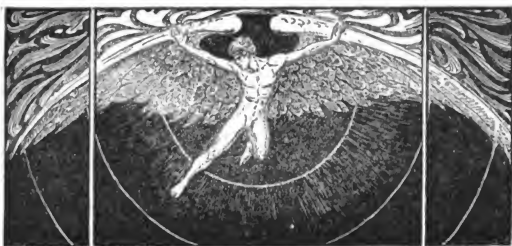
THE seed of Love awaking in the deep,
Pierced like a dream the sullen mass of sleep;
Mounted slowly, waving its wings against the
dark,
Kindling a sudden spark
In aboriginal repose. Flight!
Striking through layer after layer of night,
Ascending!
With straining gesture and resounding breath,
Rising, ascending, still
Through twilight never-ending,



Monstrous, lowering shapes contending,
Wings shattered against the icy chill,
Hurled down again into the depths of death,
Inarticulately swept beyond the reaches of existence,
Like a dead leaf down uncharted streets beyond all
time and distance,
Tempest driven, broken pinions through the spaces
terrifying,
Blown athwart the howling winds of winter, frantic
voices crying
Through interminable twilight, voices of the dying,
Hurled downward into darkness and the silence of the
snows.



OUT of the pit of non-existence glows
Another flame, and out of quiet springs
The rhythm of uprising wings;
The agile music of creative love
Surprises the abyss with joyful din;
Pulsating lights come surging in
Out of the east and west,
Splashing a spray of glittering stars above
Night's overtowering crest;
Out of the south and north
White hands assault the portals of the dead;
The great doors yield and swing, flame-garmented,
Life rushes forth.



OUT of the house of death step forth the stars,
Green impulse moves the slowly thawing
ground,

Succeeding waves of life climb up the bars
And flood the vacant shore with forms and sound.
Friend clings to friend; sonorous words astound
The ancient hush, and through the brooding night
The resolute torch-bearer goes his round
While beacon after beacon flares to light,
Giving to eager eyes their little zones of sight.



HARPERS and dancers pass before the flame,
Prophets and gods and kings and demons fill
The vision, and then vanish as they came,
From dark to dark, into the outer chill;
The wind that wakes the outposts on the hill
Sings not of them nor of their mournful story,
For suddenly bright baths of colour spill
Upon the shining sea, and fiery glory
Outlines the path of dawn behind the promontory.



OUT of the drifting fog wan figures creep
Who have outwatched the night, and from the
clay,
Rising resplendent from their age of sleep,
Old dreamers wake to hail the exultant day.
In vain the lingering winter frosts delay,
There comes a spring they never shall destroy;
These are the feet that dance upon their way,—
Pass on, Immortal Girl, Immortal Boy,
Yours are the feet that dance, invincible with joy.



THE eyes that only knew the dark, discover
Wide valleys and ripe hills and crystal wells;
Today the loveless has found love, the lover
Sings through the forest, chasing miracles.
The brazen noon reverberates with bells
That ring no hour, but new delights, and then
Each hermit soul withdraws where wisdom dwells,
To wait the twilight when all leaves and men
Sink tranquilly into their Mother's arms again.

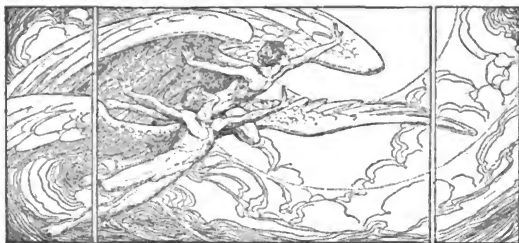


THE shrivelled seed drops from the open husk
And falls unnoticed to the frosty ground;
The frozen pond reflects the fading dusk,
And tangled, naked birches that surround
Its margin loom against the snowy mound
Of some forgotten tomb; all speech has passed
Utterly into silence, sound by sound;
The planet has burned out, a cinder cast
Into the dim confusion of the outer blast.



WHO wakens in the night? what sounds are
those

That stir the void out of inert repose?
What dancer dares to tread the glassy crust
Where life lies folded in defeated dust?
What flight is that which smites the icy air?
The words of life respond from sphere to sphere;
Across unbroken deserts where the snow is deep
Vague horns of fire float upward; ponderous thunders
creep
Along invisible horizons; troubled ashes
Quickened with warmth, as out of non-existence flies
Unconquerable light demanding dawn.



Circling the resistant zenith, striking out tremendous flashes,
Beating on the cliffs of darkness, breaking into starry spawn,
Pushing fiercely out of chaos, soaring into gaping spaces,
Tearing dark from dark and hurling meteors down the skies;
Crowding into outland places, calling from the ruined plain;
Voices of the passing seasons, faltering into rain,
Swirling light and darkness blending,
Wrestling, swaying, light ascending;
Struggling forms uprising to the dawn's faint rim;
Shouting the Word, the loud spring-morning hymn,
Then suddenly supremely lifted over,
They rise into the sun, the loved-one and the lover.





AIR child whom I have loved, companion still
The loneliness of my long errantry;
Be thou the track of moonlight on the sea,
The calm retreat beneath the sunny hill.
In leaves unclasping on the earliest tree,
In autumn evenings when the dew distill
Their frosty music on the prairies, fill
The doubtful silence with clear minstrelsy.

COULD Lucifer, quenched angel of the light,
Have found his god in thee as I have done,
He had not warred against the rising sun,
Nor fallen into the unending night.
Thou who hast planted dark oblivion
With gracious seeds to flower in my sight,
I thank thee that mine eyes have seen aright
The lustrous threads which Beauty's hands have spun.



BENEATH the tawdry world's external dress;
I thank thee, gentle guardian of the Stone,
That thou hast led me to this dazzling zone
From withered fields, from shadows of the cross.
Thy work is done, go forth in peace alone;
Having achieved so much I count no loss,
Knowing how ruthless are the storms that toss
Our fates apart; thy best is still my own.

IN thee there dwelled the mighty Alchemist,
Love, who is bounded by no living wall;
Thou art gone hence, but still I am his thrall,
And surely know that from those lips I kissed
I drew the secret wisdom that shall call
The dead to meet at life's eventual tryst,
When from brief beauty, all things that exist
Shall rise into the light perpetual.



LOVE bade me touch the iron into gold,
And first I touched thy hands, thine eyes,
thy lips,
Gave utterance to holy comradeships
Whose mysteries to lovers' ears are told.
And then beneath my earthly sun's eclipse,
He gravely bade me touch the manifold
Recesses of dread Nature, and behold!
The vaster hands, the vaster eyes and lips.

LET be thou still the symbol of all grace,
Elusive child of starlight and of dawn;
Be thou the ray by which the tide is drawn
Before my ship's unhesitating pace.
Be thou the tree upon my summer lawn,
The chorister above my resting place,
And bend toward me the quiet of thy face
When other faces and delights are gone.



SPARK of ascending light, from thee I learned
Love's alchemy and purifying hate;
Love that hath gleaned thy gold within my
gate,

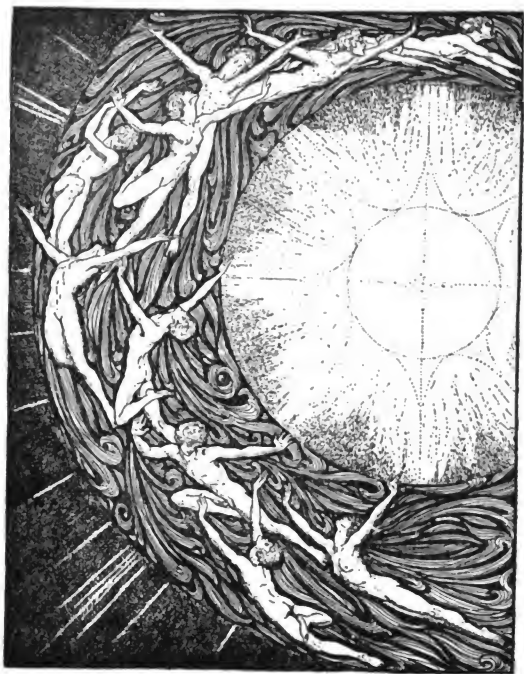
Love that with searing scorn to dust hath burned
The bitter ugliness of envious fate,
And in one autumn interval hath turned
All things that in the Universe have yearned
Toward beauty, into gold immaculate.

WHERE brooding hills lean over the deep lake
Whose empty shores reëchoed all my cries,
I watched the sun go down those final skies,
And gave my youth to sorrow for thy sake.
In meagre city streets, my sleepless eyes
Have glimpsed frail images of thee, to wake
The old desire once more, and overtake
The phantom horsemen of our memories.



THAT time is past, and once again I stand
Beneath wide sunsets after many days;
Here are the hills' forlorn, familiar ways,
And there the city, indolent and bland.
My hills I bless with outstretched arms of praise,
Over my city I hold forth my hand,
And smile at last, as through the friendly land
Steals the slow colour of the evening haze.

AND now the dusk is come, when battles cease,
When light and dark together lie in peace;
The freighted galley of our sorrow steers
Into the harbour of the Golden Fleece.
The spirit opens to the stars and hears
The wings of Love that brush the trembling spheres.





THE one creator, giver of all light,
Touches the world with beauty's glowing
Stone;

The naked form of Being struggles through the night,
And through contending silence strikes the Word.

The end and the beginning are as one;
The ring of light encircles the abyss of dark
In one unbroken arc.

Amid the circle lies the Stone
Drawing the flashing ring
Inward across the intervening zone.



The columns of the Universe are stirred
By challenges flung out and echoing.
The resolute torch-bearer pushes on,
Striding across the gulf from sun to sun,
Kindling the stars in space,
Kindling the spring
In the reluctant snows of the desert place,
Moving the tides across the drowsy sea,
Drawing the spirit toward one face
As a ship to the port where she would be,
Flowering undefiled after the spring,
In harvest time, and child-bearing.



Planting the seeds of stars, of trees, of men,
Sowing the wombs of space, of soil, of flesh,
That Beauty may live again,
And after winter, summer rise afresh;
Planting the seeds of colour and of song
In the deep caverns of the artist's mind,
To whom the secrets of the gods belong
Alone among his kind.
The sterile and the false shall burn away
Beneath the Stone's hot ray,
Gold in flesh and soul shall be
Reconsecrate to deity.



TO live and to create,
Wisely to love, wisely to hate,
These are the syllables the forest sings,
These are the letters on the skies' wide scroll,
The answer shouted by innumerable springs
To all the wintry questions of the soul.
The ugly children of oblivion,
Oblivion shall claim,
When Beauty laughs beneath the sun
Washed in flame.
Defile not beauty, you that would not wound
Life that struggles from the void;
The bloated eyes of lust, the mind untuned,
Shall pass again into the vacant dark;
They who destroy shall be in turn destroyed,
Nor feel the Alchemist's transmuting spark.

[50]



THE gleaming shafts of sunlight strike the crags,
Swift arrows from the radiant archer's bow;
Across the ocean like defeated flags,
Torn into shreds the winter hazes blow.
From hills incalculably far I hear
A grinding avalanche of melting snow,
Leaving the upland meadows moist and clear,
Where early blades and slender fingers grope
Upward to feel the sparkling atmosphere.
The trees that cling to the precarious slope,
The stunted trees that lie along the ground,
Reveal the shy confessions of their hope
And swell with leaves; the half-forgotten sound
Of falling water quickens the still air.



Within the city's unpropitious round
Of toil and food and sooty-faced despair,
A subtle smile creeps down the muddy street;
Insistent green arises from the bare
Scant soil of parks, and the keen wind is sweet
Beside the bay where seagulls flash and glance.
Some music seems to call the aching feet
To play again, and bright uncouth romance
Shines out of hungry eyes, as new desire
Suggests new joys, the same that could entrance
Pharaohs of Egypt, galley-slaves of Tyre,
Beggars and kings and clerks, the same that heaves
The ancient mountains into gusts of fire,
That rides into the maze the forest weaves,
That kindles all things man has thought or done,
That scatters into space the silver sheaves
Of stars; that still shall plant oblivion
Until there be no void, only the infinite Sun.

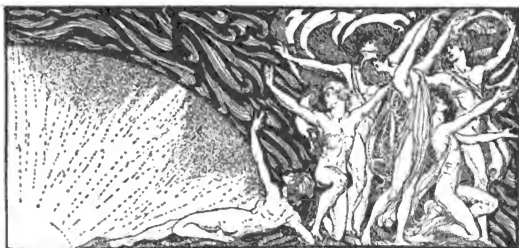
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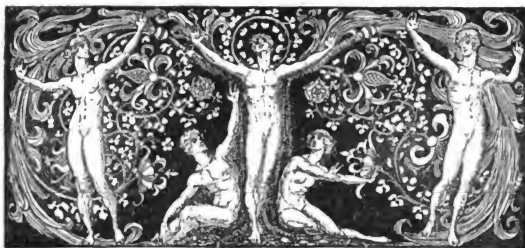
THE clarions call across the interim
Of space, call to the lovers of the earth;
The drums of death answer, heavy and dim;
Shake out the music of the ancient hymn,
Shake out new leaves, thrice-consecrated trees,
Blaze into light, new stars, new galaxies,
Pass on, O laughing face, O voice of mirth,
Pass on, O mighty hearts that dared to break,
Pass on, O lovers of all men and things.
The sullen depths of silence heave and shake
With the sudden thunder of uprising wings.
In vain the winter tempests crush them down,
In vain the black smoke rises from the town,
In vain the wide free pasture lands are scarred
With hideous forms that war against the light.



In vain the scientist invokes the night;
In vain, in vain, new universes starred
Innumerably, bridge the new abyss.
Pass on, white rapture of the virgin kiss,
Pass on, great artist souls of all the world;
In vain the dangerous winds are hurled
Against your towers, in vain the fierce snows hiss
Against your palaces of truth and dream.
They shall not quiet the indomitable theme,
They shall not freeze the flooding stream,
They shall not halt the souls that teem
In splendour up the shadowy air,
Nor cloud the free horizons where
New suns ascend.



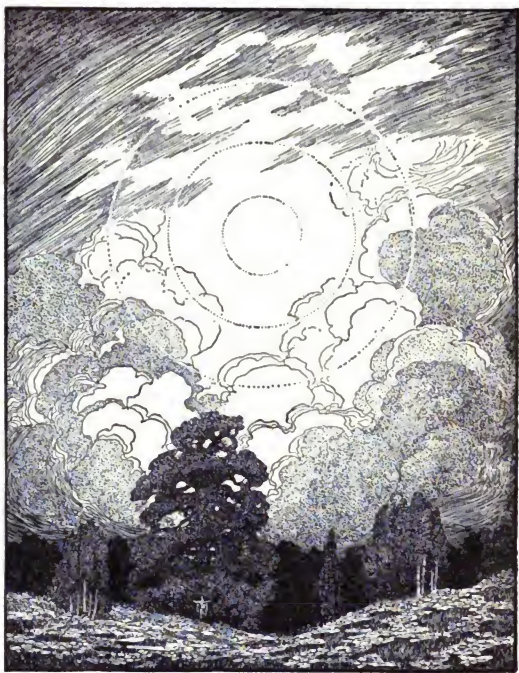
THE flame of being rings infinity,
Flawless, without beginning, without end;
Out of the centre of all worlds that be
Dart the fine rays of beauty, till they meet
The ring of life. And they shall meet;
Pass on, O dancing feet,
Pass on, Immortal Girl, Immortal Boy,
Pass on, dear stricken faces of the brave
Who bade love rise from the beloved's grave,
Pass on, white feet of joy,
Pass on, O voice of mirth,
And all you fair and happy of the earth,
Pass on abundantly;
You that have sought the hidden gold,
You whose beauty shall unfold
Upon the Tree.



Pass on, for you the morning sings
The glory of all earthly things,
For you the harvest of all springs,
Wisdom, Life, Divinity,
Love.



THE CODA





POET a thousand years hence!
My windows darken, and the lonely sense
Of gaping time subdues my distant cry.
You will awake beneath another sky;
The forest I have loved you will not know;
The face that I have sought you will not meet;
My meadows green with youth or blue with snow,
My shady arbours and my garden seat,
All things that made my senses shrink or glow, —
Less than a curious episode
Upon a gypsy road.



GET, when you also issue from that door
Whose fiery lintel you shall pass no more,
And seek the solace of the empty shore,
When the flood tide comes thundering in
Against the hollow drum of sand,
With a deep reverberating din
As though the stars, the skies, and all that is
Were massed behind those marching symphonies;
Will you not stand
And cry aloud above the sifting gale
As I have cried long since, "Hail, Master, Hail.
Thy pulse is mine, thy conflict too is mine,
In me behold thine image, I am thine,
And walk with thee, triumphant and divine;—



Love that hath planted Being's fruitful spark
To flower into flame amid the dark;
Love that hath hidden in the tangled root
Of earthly things the mystic gem of beauty;
Love that hath set no task nor any duty
In life, except to live in very deed,
And nourish well the blossom of the fruit;
Love that sets every unsubstantial creed
At nought, that life may shimmer with delight,
Performing miracles before my sight,
So that the world becomes a lover's face,
And every glade a holy trysting place,
And everywhere the joy of hill and tree,
And light transfiguring mortality."





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